



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

POLICY UPDATE

November 2018

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USCIRF's Mission

*To elevate and promote
international religious
freedom as a norm
and practice.*

Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights in North Korea

By Alex Iverson, Researcher

Freedom of religion or belief is much more than a fundamental human right—it is a crucial component of global stability. Nations that disregard religious freedom are typically mired in poverty and insecurity, war and terror, and violent, radical extremism, all of which are destabilizing factors with direct bearing on U.S. national security interests. In fact, the United States has seldom faced a major adversary that respected its people's inherent right to freedom of religion or belief. Regardless of the nation in question or its style of governance, systemic restrictions on religious freedom often are key drivers of social conflict and instability. Thus, religious freedom and related human rights merit inclusion alongside U.S. security and economic concerns, and in the case of North Korea (also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK), alongside talks for final, fully verified denuclearization.

In North Korea, the regime's approach toward religion and belief is among the most repressive in the world. Put simply, freedom of religion or belief does not exist in North Korea. Although the North Korean constitution protects its people's freedom of religion in principle, in practice the regime exerts absolute influence over a handful of state-controlled houses of worship permitted to exist. This creates a facade of religious life maintained chiefly for propaganda purposes.

All religious activities occurring outside this heavily-regulated domain are severely restricted, and independent believers often face arrest, torture, beatings, and execution. The North Korean regime interprets all religion or belief, Christianity in particular, as a threat to its very existence. The North Korean government continues to perpetuate its longstanding record of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. Accordingly, in 2018, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) again [*recommended*](#)



that the State Department designate North Korea as a “country of particular concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended.

Inter-Korean Relations and the U.S.-North Korea Summit

In 2018, there has been unprecedented engagement between North and South Korea, as well as between North Korea and the United States. USCIRF has long-urged the United States and its regional allies to seek agreements on humanitarian, religious freedom, and human rights concerns as part of any negotiations with Pyongyang and to link concrete progress in these areas to any economic, political, or diplomatic assistance used to entice openness and an end to nuclear proliferation.

North Korea’s diplomatic relations with South Korea have been historically turbulent. In a recurring pattern, Pyongyang makes vague commitments to the international community and then fails to follow through after securing concessions, and/or undermining agreements with provocative actions, including small-scale military aggression and nuclear and ballistic missile testing. Over time, this predictable cycle has eroded trust and increased tensions with South Korea. However,

the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea ushered in what appears to be a new era of diplomatic engagement and cooperation between the two Koreas.

Among the many promising developments, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in have met three times since April and are planning a fourth meeting in Seoul before the end of 2018. The two leaders have made announcements expressing their desire for greater cooperation, denuclearization, and renewed efforts to convert the 1953 armistice agreement to a full peace treaty. Kim Jong-un has also pledged to suspend all future nuclear and ballistic missile testing and has made some modest efforts to dismantle known testing facilities. These discussions laid some of the groundwork for Pyongyang’s high-level discussions with the United States government.

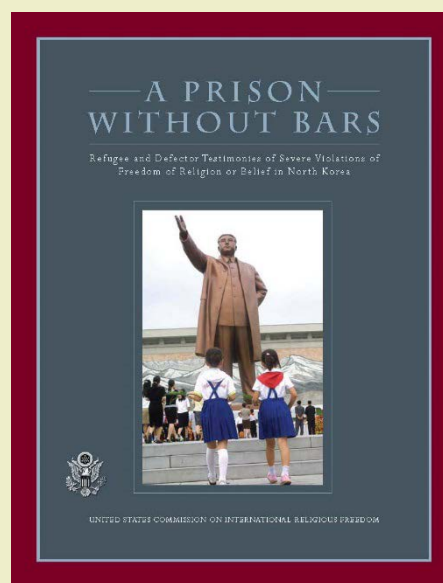
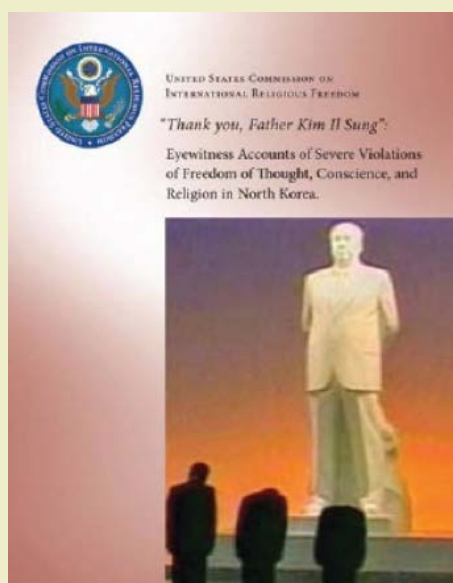
Meanwhile, the road to dialogue with the United States became clearer once Pyongyang released three American prisoners ahead of the historic June 12, 2018 U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore. This goodwill gesture marked the first occasion since 2012 that no American citizens were being held captive in North Korea. Discussions at the summit focused primarily on denuclearization, but sources indicate that human rights were also on the

USCIRF's Previous Work on North Korea

North Korea first appeared in USCIRF's [2001 Annual Report](#)—the Commission's second-ever review of international religious freedom violations—and recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate it as a CPC. USCIRF has made this recommendation every year since, and the State Department has followed through with the CPC designation for North Korea in each instance it has made such designations, which does not always occur annually.

In USCIRF's reporting about North Korea, the Commission has acknowledged the difficulty in obtaining information about the regime's human rights violations. To better understand religious freedom and related human rights conditions in North Korea, USCIRF commissioned two studies: [Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung](#), dated November 2005, based on in-depth interviews with North Korean defectors, as well as historical and comparative analysis of religious freedom abuses that occurred in the country over several decades; and a follow-up dated March 2008, [A Prison Without Bars](#) (also available in [Korean](#)). Also in 2008, USCIRF [traveled](#) to South Korea to speak at a conference on human rights in North Korea and to meet with South Korean government officials, academics, religious leaders, and North Korean defectors to discuss human rights conditions in the north.

USCIRF strongly supported the work of the [United Nations \(UN\) Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) and its groundbreaking report released in 2014, which found "an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion." After the report's release, the UN held high-profile discussions about North Korea's human rights abuses, and the sustained pressure prompted the North Korean regime to respond with an unprecedented 54,000-word denial and send a foreign minister to the 2014 UN General Assembly for the first time in 15 years. USCIRF continues to recommend that the UN conduct a follow-up inquiry to assess any new developments, particularly with respect to freedom of religion or belief.



agenda. U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo later [confirmed](#) that religious freedom and the status of Japanese abductees were explicitly addressed. The summit concluded with the signing of a [joint statement](#).

Some human rights advocates expressed disappointment over the prevailing emphasis on security. Nevertheless, the Trump administration again underscored religious freedom and related human rights in North Korea, this time publicly, at the July 2018 [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by Secretary Pompeo. North Korean defector Ji Hyeona addressed the Ministerial, describing how North Korean authorities imprisoned and tortured her for possessing a Bible. In remarks at the Ministerial, Vice President Mike Pence [said](#), "...there is no escaping the plain fact that North Korea's leadership has exacted unparalleled privation and cruelty upon its people for decades."

At the time of writing, negotiations between the United States and North Korea remained inconclusive. Pyongyang has vehemently rejected proposed timelines for denuclearization. Additionally, North Korea's top diplomat, Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, has reportedly made statements to his Iranian counterparts suggesting that his country would retain its nuclear knowledge as a form of leverage on the United States. President Donald J. Trump, citing a lack of progress in the negotiations, canceled Secretary Pompeo's August visit to Pyongyang, which was to include [Stephen Biegun](#), the newly appointed U.S. Special Representative for North Korea. After Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister Ri met in New York City during the UN General Assembly in September 2018, the Secretary again visited North Korea in October 2018, this time with Special Representative Biegun. In November 2018, Secretary Pompeo was scheduled to meet with a senior-level North Korean envoy in New York City. This meeting was abruptly canceled, and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley later said that Pyongyang

temporarily postponed the encounter so that North Korean diplomats could more thoroughly prepare for negotiations. While the event has yet to be confirmed, senior U.S. government officials have indicated that a second U.S.-DPRK summit will still likely take place in early 2019.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Denuclearization discussions often overshadow North Korea's myriad human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations, even though these fundamental rights are profoundly suppressed. Moreover, given North Korea's extremely closed nature, information about current religious freedom conditions and the number of religious followers is difficult to obtain and verify. Although little updated information is available for 2018, there are no known developments to indicate that conditions have improved during the year. The following represents a sample of the most recent verified information on religious freedom conditions in North Korea.

- In a 2017 survey conducted by the South Korean nongovernmental organization Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), more than 99 percent of 11,805 North Korean defectors surveyed claimed there was no religious freedom in North Korea.
- In 2017, the most current data available, NKDB documented 1,304 violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief in North Korea. The abuses included 119 killings, 87 disappearances, and 770 detentions.
- Due to a policy of collective punishment for practicing a religion, the families of those imprisoned because of their faith are often detained as well, regardless of their own beliefs.

- According to the [*U.S. Department of State*](#), between 80,000 and 120,000 political prisoners are being held in North Korea's notoriously harsh labor camps. By some accounts up to 50,000 of these detainees are Christian. Former inmates often report that religious believers are singled out for more draconian treatment, such as torture, sexual abuse, and execution.
- Any religious activity practiced outside state-sanctioned venues, including praying, singing hymns, and reading religious texts, often results in severe punishment.

Conclusion and Recommendations for U.S. Policy

President Trump's initial meeting with Kim Jong-un was a promising development, but subsequent progress toward denuclearization has been slow, and Pyongyang has given no indication that it intends to respect human rights and religious freedom. Nevertheless, the North Korean regime's newfound willingness to engage in dialogue, however tenuous, provides a unique opportunity to promote universal human rights in a country that has traditionally resisted outside pressure. Emphasizing the importance of religious freedom while working toward denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula could drastically improve human rights in North Korea and contribute to greater regional stability.

It is imperative to recognize that the U.S.-North Korea summit marked the beginning of a process, not the end. Although past experience has undeniably created a trust deficit, simple, tangible

measures to ease restrictions on religious belief in North Korea could serve to alleviate lingering suspicions of Pyongyang's true intentions and demonstrate its sincere commitment to maintain a dialogue, improve diplomatic relations, and ultimately reach a denuclearization agreement endorsed by all stakeholders.

In addition to redesignating North Korea as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act, USCIRF recommends the U.S. government:

- Pressure the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country;
- Urge Pyongyang to grant international aid workers access to North Korea's most vulnerable populations, including political prisoners, to administer routine medical care and general humanitarian assistance; and
- Make any future discussions regarding the easing or lifting of sanctions contingent upon North Korea's sincere and demonstrable efforts to improve its religious freedom and human rights record consistent with international standards.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Insist that Congress be consulted and have a role in considering modifications to mandatory U.S. sanctions on North Korea, as well as any agreement reached between the United States and North Korea.



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The Latest *from* USCIRF

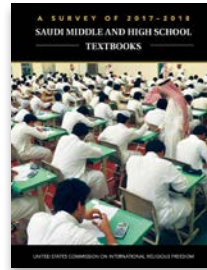


2018 Annual Report

(April 2018)

USCIRF's flagship publication contains extensive policy recommendations to the White House, the Secretary of State, and the Congress concerning religious freedom abroad.

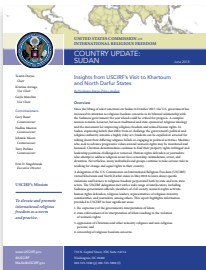
Abbreviated version



A Survey of 2017-2018 Saudi Middle and High School Textbooks

(November 2018)

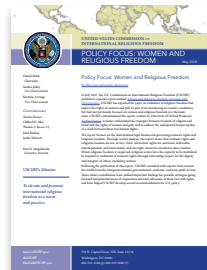
This follow-on contracted study reviews 22 Saudi middle and high school textbooks.



Country Update: Sudan

(June 2018)

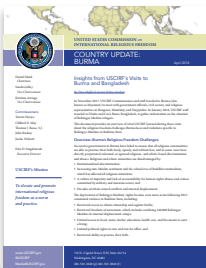
This update shares insights from USCIRF's visit to Khartoum and North Darfur states.



Policy Focus: Women and Religious Freedom

(May 2018)

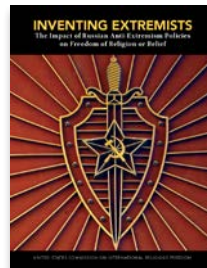
This policy focus follows USCIRF's first-ever report to focus on women and religious freedom as a thematic issue.



Country Update: Burma

(April 2018)

This update shares insights from USCIRF's visits to Burma and Bangladesh.



Inventing Extremists: The Impact of Russian Anti-Extremism Policies on Freedom of Religion

(February 2018)

This report examines Russian anti-extremist legislation, corresponding law enforcement practices, and their effects on freedom of religion or belief from 2011 to 2017.



Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

Commissioners work for the release of individuals who have been imprisoned for their religious identity, beliefs, practices, or advocacy and highlight the laws and policies that led to the imprisonment.